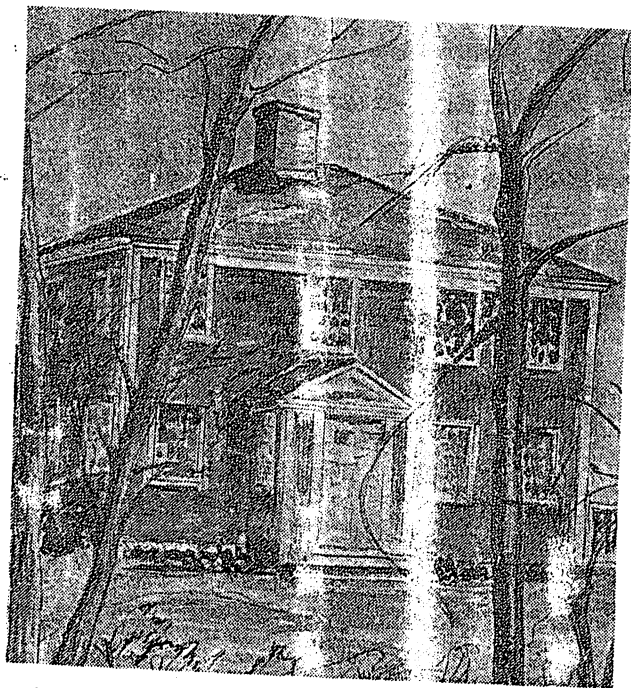


The Romance of House Date-Boarding

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY



Make no mistake about it: it is a romance. It is a love affair with all the warm, close moments and some distant and cold ones. If you love your old house, and grow misty-eyed as you drive in the yard late at night after a harrowing day in town, then you, too, are hooked. And you, like me, won't rest until you've found who built it and when and perhaps why. Our love affair with our house began even before we had bought it. I admired the way it sat -- flat on the land, as if it really meant to be there. It was just there, and it demanded a response.

Of course, the first response was an accommodation. An accommodation to a new age and adaptation to a new lifestyle, that of the 20th century. This involved extending the ell and adding a wing with all the gadgets for the elimination of home drudgery we'd read about. This was relatively easy -- all we needed was money. And then we set about renovating. I volunteered to "restore" the basement apartment that was now sheathed in both walls and ceiling with lathes and plaster. Taking down the ceiling on several hot August afternoons proved to be something of a challenge, and the plaster dust in my larynx and lungs as well as over most of the upstairs provided diversion in these early days of retirement.

All along I was haunted by a curiosity as to where the old house had come from and when. I had met and talked with Mrs. Dorothy Wentworth on several other matters of Duxbury history (as town historian for a number of years, she was an encyclopedia of Duxbury lore), and she was enthusiastic about the project.

"Why it's no trick at all. Take your deed to the Registry of Deeds in Plymouth and go over to the north wall and take down the appropriate records and you'll find all about it. I think you'll find your house was built by Charlemagne-Cushman in 1791."

I was excited and thrilled and lost no time getting to the registry and everything went swimmingly until I found that in the mid-1800s the property had been bought at a public auction held as a result of town meeting action for delinquent taxes in the amount of \$79.90. The bankrupt former owners consisted of 5 persons, each of whom had some claim to my house and property.

At a coffee klatch held . . . Barbara Cook's house some recent date-board researchers related similar experiences. One had bought a house purporting to have been built in 1732, only to discover the date to be 1832. What is more, the property turned out to be that of the house next door! Then it was discovered that a newly-acquired house had been turned over under court order to another family to pay off a bad debt. In this way, date-boarding can be viewed as a study in the annular rings of a fallen tree. Dateboards reveal the times and the weather of each year, whether mild or cold, nourishing or depriving, infestations of insects, etc. I rushed to Dorothy Wentworth when I saw my project turn into a chameleon and her always reassuring reply was, "Well, indeed, those were hard times in Duxbury and people came to town and bought up land cheap for speculation. Just go on back and you'll do okay."

So back to the registry I went. My problem first was getting the right owner (I was always digging up nephews and grandchildren of the same name), but my second problem next to heaving these gigantic record books down from the shelves in the basement was seduction by side events (such as stipulating that well water be always provided the new buyer, and setting aside a third of a barn for a favorite cow).

Our coffee klatch brought some other interesting tidbits, such as the extremely low prices on articles of every day use, like umbrellas, books, furniture and so on, and one is impressed by the fact that in a culture like that of our ancestors, these material assistances to living were terribly important. I don't believe anyone then ever thought of a yard sale, for example. I was always struck, too, by the designations of people, i.e., never just their names, but always "shipwright," "yeoman," "freeholder," and

so on. People were known by their trades and occupations.

It was these bypaths that beckoned to me and I found myself reading on and on totally forgetting what I was supposed to be looking up. So I found it was wise to carry a notebook and jot down little notes in addition to the record of the ancestry of the house itself, to keep my mind on the job. Indeed, I discovered that I could not keep my attention on this task longer than 2 hours at a time, and I do not believe this was due to approaching senility!

Probably Duxbury's oldest house structure still standing is a section of the C.F. Eaton house off Washington St., dated 1638, first a colonial residence, then modernized in such a way as to incorporate the original. The next oldest is the Hunt House off Dead Man's curve on 3A, which has kept its original contours.

Next would be the John Brown (weaver) House on the Eaton property dated 1643, followed, of course, by the John Alden House itself, dated 1653. The site of the first John Alden House marked by a cellar and a bronze tablet is dated 1627. One wonders what materials he was able to put together at that early date.

Another oldtimer is Cranberry Cottage on Cranberry Island at Millbrook, dated 1665. Carroll Bryant's beautifully restored house on High St. bears the dateboard and name "Dr. Thomas Delano, 1667." We must mention next Alexander Standish's house off Goose Point, Standish Shore, which has the date 1666 on its large square central chimney. No date is given for Myles Standish's own house, but it is safe to conclude it was probably the first one to be built in town.

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It is a real privilege to live in a community uniquely treasured in so many ways, especially its own houses. It was in an effort to preserve these records of these old houses that the date-boarding project began probably as the brainchild of Dorothy Wentworth herself. And she soon gathered around her a blue-ribbon committee who got the program underway. Here's what she wrote in her notes:

"The plan was to provide a lettered board giving original owner and date of construction whenever these could be documented, with 1850 (now extended by the executive board of the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society to 1860) more or less as a flexible cut-off date.

"The procedure has been to document a house through deeds, going back to a time when the property was land only and on to the first mention of a dwelling. Sometimes the construction date becomes obvious, sometimes it is determined by the dates of a marriage, sale of another house, or, rarely, a family record. It is slow and tedious work involving long hours at the Registry of Deeds and Registry of Probate. Vital records genealogies and town reports sometimes supply or confirm the facts. Occasionally something turns up unexpectedly, supplying the one missing bit, a satisfaction that makes up for all the discouragements."

A reconstituted date-board committee, consisting of Walter Kopke, Virginia Seaver, Bob Dente, Barbara Cook and this writer, has now begun work, greatly expanding the area of possible resources and directions for research and we all urge all who read this account to join in making the trip to learn the who and when of your old house.

In addition to the resources listed above, there are: the Duxbury Room in the Duxbury Free Library; archives of Duxbury Town Hall (with town clerk permits for vital records: marriages, births, deaths, etc.); town clerk's office reference room -- old town reports; maps -- especially available in the Duxbury Room, also numerous histories of Duxbury and Plymouth, etc.; Wentworth Library at the Drew House.

My own research took me back to 1706 when a Stephen Bryant was allotted a piece of land extending all the way from the Kingston line across Island Creek and reaching all the way to what we now call Hall's Corner. This was again divided at Island Creek some time later and sold to Christopher Wentworth. Wadsworth built a house Dorothy Wentworth date-boarded as 1763 in the days when there was a highway that ran roughly where the Old Colony Railroad ran. (There was no Border Rd. by that was later moved down the hill and sits on the corner of Pill Hill Lane.

Having all these dates and places to fall back on, I went back to the Registry again with renewed zeal. I had finished the dismantling of the plaster ceiling and disclosed a gorgeous set of pine beams which my artist neighbor quickly sealed with polyurethane and we bought a nautical ceiling lamp and what a lovely place it now is! Our new wing with its plethora of modern appliances promised to make retirement living a real joy and life took on new meaning.

I dug up an original deed from a Joshua Cushman, who had willed his property he had earlier, I discovered, bought from Christopher Wadsworth. This was clearly dated 1784 and stipulated that the land was decided to Charlemagne Cushman, "with dwelling house thereon" -- and so this was my cue. I did not know that this house, actually built in 1784, was not my house. All I knew was that a house was standing then. So I made my wild guess because I was turning point of the Revolutionary War, that my date was 1777. Harriet suggested it would be very easy, too, for my welding neighbors, the Stewart brothers,

to forge 3 sevens -- also cheaper. But that was not to be. Virginia Seaver said there were insufficient data, so she went to the Registry herself and took all the time and trouble to seek some clue.

Meanwhile, I looked up town reports and saw where Charlemagne had paid taxes, and the vital records said he was born in 1776. This took care of my favorite date as a one-year-old could hardly have been able to build my house. I also sought help from the gracious secretary of the Unitarian Church and found the marriage record of Charlemagne's mother and father -- the actual hand-written record. What a thrill that was! Virginia Seaver kept working hard, as to an embarrassing degree, and still found considerable confusion.

It was discovered that a Charlemagne Cushman had built and occupied his house in 1800, so it is safe to assume that it had been completed by 1799 at the latest. So that was my date and I am grateful first to Dorothy Wentworth as I have said, and to my wife, who patiently prodded me when the going was barren and difficult, and Walter Kopke, who also urged me on and to Virginia Seaver, who would not let me content myself with a "general time frame," but insisted I get an accurate documentation -- as accurate as records would allow. And was it worth all these months -- it must have been 10, off and on -- ? Yes, indeed it was. And what did it feel like when I was handling these old records and scrutinizing this hand-written record of so long ago? As I reflected on this and began these lines, an experience I had in Hawaii came back to me.

It happened at a summer youth camp in a far corner of the island of Oahu. The camp was at the foot of a cliff overgrown with mountain laurel and tangles of ti leaves and small leafy palms. It was a good location for a youth camp for there was no escape except over this steep cliff or out to the Pacific Ocean. I had stayed over after our youth conference and was indulging myself in a swim -- a lazy restful swim to get the tensions of the preceding days out of my system. And as I lazed, floating in the water, I looked at the cliff and noticed something rather weird -- there was a switch-back trail, impossible to discern close to, but at this distance as clear as day.

So when I got to shore I donned my clothes and walked over and climbed this trail to the top of the cliff. My exertions were rewarded because here at the very edge of the land was an old Hawaiian "heiau" temple, apparently untouched since early days. Here was the black lava worship center, (where they may have lain the human sacrifice) and here nearly lining the area were the aisles of the building with large flat volcanic stones forming a pavement. I was so struck by this sight I stood for at least a full minute meditating on the strange existence we all shared. Then I began to walk and taking off my sandals, I paced over and back the entire area, thinking used by human beings like me -- a different color, all the time: "These are the very footsteps that were language and tradition, but men and women like me, nonetheless."

I must have spent several minutes there and I reported my find to the skeleton clean-up crew that had stayed over, but no one was interested enough to make the climb. "We'll take your word for it," they said.

As I was reading these old dusty tomes in the basement of the registry, this same feeling of reverence for the past lives of people came back to me. It is a feeling of reassurance, and of encouragement in a day when so many obstacles seem to face the human race. It is reassuring to know that these great folks who preceded us on this planet were people much like us, and they managed to cope with the disasters that seemed to overwhelm them -- and so can we. It is important to place our feet, so to speak, where theirs were so we in turn can take the stability of life

Henry Steele Commager at the 300th anniversary of the dedication of the "Ship Church" in Hingham said, (quote from memory), "We see here a faith in the future and a belief in the power to cope in a strange new world. Today we are beset by problems of far greater magnitude than they faced. Unlike them, you could say, we have double the problems and half the power to deal with them."

Date-boarding can give us, whether it is our house or that of a friend, a look into the past such as few other adventures can do. And as we place our feet on prints of those of so many others before us, we can take heart and kindle hope for the days ahead.